

# Voices Out of Conflict: Young People Affected by Forced Migration and Political Crisis

Post-Conference Report  
Cumberland Lodge, April 2004

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## 1. Introduction

In March 2004, Cumberland Lodge hosted the international conference, *Voices out of Conflict: Young People Affected by Forced Migration and Political Crisis*. The conference was co-sponsored by the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, the International Rescue Committee, UK and the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, New York. It brought together 95 participants from 21 different countries, including nine young people from Afghanistan, Kosovo, Palestine, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. Participants gathered to share their first-hand knowledge, research information and practitioner experience in order to promote a better understanding of young people, the challenges they face during war, and the resulting implications for the international protection regime.

The aim of the conference was to increase understanding about young people's experiences of conflict and displacement, and to generate ideas for more effective models of protection. It was proposed that there is an urgent need to move protection policy and practice toward a framework that engages young people as active participants in their own protection. Indeed, young people's participation in protection mechanisms is necessary in order to make them more relevant, effective and sustainable, and to improve young people's chances of survival and well-being in situations of extreme adversity.

### 1.1 YOUNG PEOPLE'S PROTECTION CONCERNS

The conference began by providing an opportunity for young participants from conflict zones to share their stories and experiences of war and displacement, and to articulate their most pressing protection concerns. A young Sierra Leonean woman, for example, explained the wide range of physical, social and economic issues contributing to young people's vulnerability in her country: abduction into the armed forces, rape of adolescent girls, lack of education and livelihood opportunities, and widespread proliferation of HIV/AIDS. Similarly, a young Palestinian woman described the constant humiliation, deprivation and isolation that affects young people in Palestine, in addition to the general violence which has attended their lives since the start of the Second Intafadah.

Young people's protection in post-conflict situations was also a subject of great debate. It was noted that the cessation of conflict and repatriation rarely signals an end to political insecurity or resource scarcity, and thus young people often remain subject to many of the same hazards that attended their lives during war. In addition to continued physical, social and economic dangers, many adolescents and youths are also at risk of extreme frustration and confusion when the conflict which defined their lives ends, and they must begin the process of identifying themselves all over again. Particularly for those young people involved in armed struggle, conflict may have provided them with new opportunities and meaning, and thus peace may result in loss and disillusionment when that which fighting promised is never delivered.

The protection concerns of young refugees and asylum seekers in the UK were also considered at length. Young refugees from Afghanistan and Rwanda spoke about the violence and discrimination inherent in the UK asylum system, and about the racism they experienced in British society as a whole. According to a representative of the Refugee Council, asylum standards in Britain are currently in breach of international law,

particularly as they relate to young people, whom are often denied protection on the basis of incorrect age determinations.

The stories that young people told highlighted the fact that adolescents and youth often experience specific risks during conflict due to their social roles and structural positions in society. They are particularly susceptible to myriad forms of violence, exploitation and abuse as a direct result of their age and physical maturity on the one hand, and the social position, status and roles to which their life phase refers on the other. For example, since they have reached puberty, they are physically developed, more capable of working than young children, and also more valuable to military groups. Because they are not yet considered full social adults, however, they are often denied the protections and rights associated with adulthood, such as marriage. Adolescent girls, for example, may not be given important reproductive health information despite the fact that they are sexually active and especially prone to sexual violence and exploitation.

#### *Young people's resilience*

In addition to describing the dangers faced by adolescents and youths in conflict situations, these young people also testified to the resilience and strength with which they confronted their circumstances. They shared stories of courage and perseverance that stand in stark contrast to the images of traumatized victims that permeate the ideology of so many relief organizations. Most importantly, they bore witness to the remarkable capacity of young people to contribute to their own protection.

Speaking about his experiences within the UK, for example, one Afghan youth argued that young asylum seekers learn quickly how to protect themselves both throughout the asylum process and within British society as a whole. In order to negotiate the asylum system successfully, many young people learn to lie and be innovative; inventing their own ages, dates of birth and stories so as to qualify legally for protection. Furthermore, the speaker described his concerted efforts to avoid the British Afghan community, which he felt posed threats to his safety due to his membership in a particular ethnic group and warlord family. Similarly, a young Rwandan refugee spoke of his efforts to hide his refugee status in order to escape discrimination within England, and of his long struggle to secure a place within the British education system.

## **1.2 THE INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION REGIME**

With the diversity and complexity of young people's protection concerns in mind, participants then considered the effectiveness of the international protection regime, as it exists today. In general, it was acknowledged that while there are some very positive examples of humanitarian programming in conflict situations, most protection efforts have yet to seriously or effectively address the particular needs of adolescents and youth.

Speakers addressed some shortcomings of the international protection regime as a whole, including lack of political will, geographical disparities in terms of international attention and funding, and the absence of a legal framework through which to protect internally displaced people. Often, global protection efforts are also undermined by contradictory international policies that support humanitarian and protection interventions on the one hand, and military offensives in the same country on the other.

In relation to the protection of adolescents and youth in particular, several speakers indicated the urgent need to reconsider objectives, approaches and strategies in

humanitarian protection and assistance of young people. Their comments highlighted the fact that while protection failures are sometimes the result of astounding operational obstacles in emergencies, they are more often due to misconceived ideas among policy makers and practitioners about young people, the difficulties they face, and the most appropriate and effective protection solutions.

For example, the international protection regime tends to understand protection largely in its physical sense, and thus focuses on improving national or regional security. But protection is rarely just physical, and has social, economic, emotional, psychological and spiritual dimensions as well. As several young people stressed, for example, protection is often directly linked to the opportunities available to them, such as for education and income-generation.

Concerned primarily with national or regional security, protection efforts are generally designed to guard young people against external dangers such as armed attack. Often, however, the greatest threats to young people's well-being come from within their own communities – from relatives, neighbours, friends and even the immediate family. The humanitarian community is only beginning to appreciate the importance of supporting restoration of communities' protective capacities, and rebuilding those systems of social support and civilian governance that are corroded during war.

Furthermore, emergency interventions rarely take into account those forces that distinguish *between* different categories of young people in determining their relative susceptibilities. Young people from different cultural, social, economic, gender, ethnic and religious groups experience great diversities in their safety, vulnerabilities and capacities for survival. They are not equally at risk during armed conflict, but face specific threats as a result of who they are, and how they're valued by their families and communities. Such complexity highlights the fact that there can be no uniform system of protection, and thus challenges the international community to move policy and practice toward a more holistic understanding of safety and well-being, and a more comprehensive vision of young people's protection.

#### *Adolescent and youth marginalization during humanitarian action*

Erroneous assumptions about young people and their circumstances are often the result of emergency interventions characterized by a lack of engagement with adolescents and youths themselves. Often, adult informants are relied upon to provide information about young people's needs and well-being, and humanitarian programming is largely designed around adult ideas about what's good and bad for young people and about their protection and assistance needs. But as numerous participants argued, adults frequently misinterpret young people's lives. As a result, humanitarian programming is often unrevealing of young people's own priorities at best, and detrimental to their protection and well-being at worst.

Emergency interventions often fail to address young people's most pressing concerns. This is sometimes because researchers or other adults are unaware of the events and situations that are most harmful for them. Or, adult perceptions of what is dangerous or stressful may be of little relevance to young people themselves. In a film shown by representatives of the Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and Rights Activation (PYALARA), for example, Palestinian youth demonstrated their frustration and anger at the wall being built by the Israeli government to restrict Palestinian movement within Israel. The film suggested that the violation of freedom, mobility, and

personal and national identities are major concerns for young people, perhaps as important to them as issues of physical and economic security. That much humanitarian action in Palestine neglects such concerns is particularly troubling, given the potential for such humiliation and resentment to result in young people taking up arms or offering themselves for suicide missions.

## **2. Participation: a Paradigm for Protection**

In light of the myriad dangers that adolescents and youth face in situations of conflict and displacement, and considering the grave inadequacy of the existing protection regime, there is an urgent need for a new paradigm for protection. Consensus was reached that *young people's participation* is the most viable means through which to improve protection mechanisms for war-affected adolescents and youth. Indeed, it was argued that *not* to involve young people in humanitarian action makes it impossible to protect them, and opens up the very real possibility of harming them instead.

Throughout the conference and this report, young people's participation has been understood to refer to their active involvement in decisions and activities that affect their lives, and the process of exerting power and influence over their situations. This commonly implies consultation with young people, or their involvement in various stages of humanitarian programming such as design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

### **2.1 PARTICIPATION IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCIES**

Many participants argued that given the particular roles and abilities of adolescents and youths, we should engage them as active participants in the establishment of protection mechanisms, with constructive roles in ensuring their own safety. Interestingly, the humanitarian sector has been conspicuously slow to develop participatory work with young people in comparison to other fields. Development work with working and street children, for example, increasingly relies upon their contributions to improve project impact and to empower them in society as a whole.

In general, humanitarian work is only beginning to offer young people the same opportunities to influence decisions made about their lives. To a large degree, young people are still marginalized during humanitarian action, and treated as beneficiaries with little say in the protection mechanisms designed on their behalf. And yet, the dichotomy between emergency contexts and development ones may not be as pronounced as we believe. Many modern conflicts are protracted, and wax and wane over extended periods of time. Often communities reside in refugee camps for decades. Therefore, it was suggested that provision of opportunities for involvement in meaningful social action that enables young people to better protect themselves should be seen as an emergency measure, and not a programmatic strategy to consider with the arrival of peace. Overall, the link between protection and participation was agreed to be crucial, and young people's participation was promoted as the basis for more effective and sustainable protection programming with adolescents and youth in emergency situations.

### **2.2 BENEFITS OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION**

The conference generated preliminary discussion about the benefits resulting from young people's involvement in humanitarian programming. Both short and long-term benefits were identified, and young people's participation was advanced as both a means to an end, and an end in itself. On the one hand, protection mechanisms influenced by adolescents and youths themselves are often based upon an enriched, deeper understanding of the issues affecting young people, and are thus likely to enjoy greater relevance, sustainability, effectiveness and efficiency. On the other hand, active involvement and positive engagement of young people in their social environment often affords young people skills, knowledge and experience which may be sources of protection in themselves.

#### *Improved protection mechanisms*

There are growing examples of young people's involvement in humanitarian interventions improving the quality of protection. For instance, it was argued that in the Philippines protection may sometimes be as basic as providing young combatants with mosquito nets for malaria control. As in this situation, consultation with young people often alerts us to the most meaningful safety measures that may nevertheless have escaped our notice.

In a more complex example, it was suggested that involving young people in the design and dissemination of reproductive health information and services may vastly improve both the reach and effectiveness of reproductive health care. For instance, adolescents and youths are likely to know best what methods will most impress their peers, what times reproductive health clinics should be open, and what fears or practical circumstances may prevent young people from seeking reproductive health information and care. If this is the case, then seeking young people's assistance and advice could have a major impact on reproductive health crises in conflict situations throughout the world.

#### *Increased skills, knowledge and experience, increased self-esteem*

Participation in humanitarian programming also promises to have significant long-term consequences for young people's protection. Often, it leads to the enhancement of skills, knowledge and experience that in turn empower young people to assume greater control over their lives and bring about positive and sustainable change in their situations. As many young people pointed out, involvement in youth groups and humanitarian activities often engages them in activities that develop or enhance important competencies such as leadership skills, and thus contribute to their wider personal and social development. This often leads to increased self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-efficacy in young people, which are all critical to the development of capacities for self-protection.

#### *Improved family and community relations*

Young people's participation may also have a positive effect on family and community levels. As young people gain knowledge and skills, their status within the family and community may be enhanced, which often brings about increased community awareness and concern for their protection issues. Furthermore, participatory projects often encourage the development of important support networks, the strengthening of peer relationships, and the establishment or renegotiation of adult relationships that lead to increased potential for community protection of adolescents and youth.

### *Enhanced positive social engagement*

Involvement in humanitarian programming may also offer young people much needed opportunities for engagement in positive activities at a time when they are at extremely high risk due to frustration, isolation and hopelessness. Given exorbitant unemployment rates for adolescents and youth in conflict situations, for example, many are dangerously idle, and thus subject to myriad forms of exploitation and abuse. Participation offers a constructive way to fill the void that characterizes young people's lives, and a positive way to channel their energies into socially valuable initiatives that may be important for both individual and collective security. Giving young people the opportunity to voice their opinions, play a meaningful role in their communities, address issues that affect their lives, and envision and work toward a better future may also prevent them from trying to achieve social and political change through violent activities instead.

## **2.3 CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION**

While acknowledging that involving young people in humanitarian action may have a positive effect on their safety and well-being, discussion also focused on the myriad ethical and practical issues that arise during participation of adolescents and youths in emergency interventions. Overall, it was emphasized that there are significant challenges to conceptualising, operationalizing and internalising young people's participation in humanitarian programming. The questions raised in this section reflect a desire for continued debate regarding concrete, practical ways forward for working with young people in emergency contexts.

### **2.3.1 CONSTRAINTS TO YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION**

#### *Cultural constraints*

Throughout the conference, discussion focused on the constraints which cultural attitudes toward young people posed for their participation in humanitarian action. In most societies, young people enjoy less social power than adults. Often, they have great difficulty communicating openly with adults or officials, and are reluctant to express their opinions or challenge traditional hierarchies due to fear of punishment. As a result, they frequently lack the confidence necessary to challenge adult power and authority regarding issues that affect their lives.

Furthermore, for many communities, the prospect of young people's empowerment may represent a major shift in social functioning, and may be unwelcome to adults for whom it means a loss of power and control. Participants recognized that in such contexts, parents and community members have the ability to thwart young people's efforts if they're perceived to be a threat to their own positions.

There is thus an urgent need to work closely with adults – parents, teachers and community leaders – in order to ensure the safety and sustainability of participatory projects. Indeed, the young are but one group of people affected by conflict, and understanding how they interact with other social groups is critical to developing effective programmes. The case was made that it is impossible to conduct successful participatory programmes without working with adults, and that initiatives that focus exclusively on young people will fail to envision effective ways for adults to share power with young people. Participation was thus promoted as an intergenerational process that requires ongoing dialogue and collaboration with adults, and that sees them as partners whose support and advocacy is vital to a project's success. To this end, participants



stressed the need for more practical strategies for overcoming adult resistance and creating a context for young people's participation.

*Logistical constraints: time, access, finances*

Involving adolescents and youths in humanitarian action may also be difficult in contexts where they are expected to contribute to the maintenance of the household by performing domestic chores, taking care of relatives, or seeking gainful employment. Often, such responsibilities disallow young people from taking time out to organise or participate in youth activities.

Similarly, lack of financial resources often prevents adolescents and youths from taking part in projects. Or, young people may be able and willing to participate in humanitarian programming, but are barred from involvement due to security-related restrictions on their movement. In the context of political violence can we ensure access to marginalised groups?

One of the most fundamental barriers to developing youth leadership of humanitarian programming is lack of adequate funding allocated to adolescent/youth-run initiatives. While young people are beginning to be involved in humanitarian action, the international community has yet to truly support their efforts. And yet, there are promising results where young people have been given power and money, and thus the onus is on the international community to support young people's efforts toward self-protection.

### 2.3.2 ETHICAL ISSUES RELATED TO YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION

*Enhanced risk*

The gravest indictment of participatory approaches is that encouraging young people to take on further responsibilities in conflict situations may add to the risks they face and expose them to increased danger. Indeed, in an unstable political and security climate, simply bringing young people together may entail risk of harassment by authorities or recruitment by armed forces. What steps can we take to adequately address the risks of participatory programming when there are political issues at stake?

Secondly, conference participants discussed the danger inherent in empowering young people in societies structured upon rigid generational hierarchies and complete authority of elders. Fundamentally, young people's participation is about a redistribution of power. And yet, adults are often ambivalent about sharing power with young people. Young people's participation may thus lead to strained relationships, community resentment and resistance at best, or a violent backlash at worst. In some cases, participation may encourage young people toward actions that are in direct conflict with the values of their parents or the wider community, and thus have serious negative consequences for them. According to one young participant, for example, it is highly inappropriate in Sierra Leone for young people to challenge their elders in public, and breaking this rule may make young people the target of either physical or spiritual revenge. Elsewhere too, young people who speak out may come under fire in their communities, be stigmatised, ostracized, or even become the targets of violence.

Again, participants stressed the importance of working closely with parents and communities to ensure that efforts to empower young people are not perceived as a danger to adults' own positions. This suggests the importance of understanding how youths are treated culturally, of negotiating space for intergenerational dialogue, and of

doing preparatory work in communities in order to make room for young people's participation. In doing so, however, we are reminded that a focus on young people needs to be placed in a context of respect for individual communities and their cultures. How can we achieve this balance between young people's leadership and respect for cultural practice, traditional social structures and power dynamics? To what extent should we encourage young people to challenge the hierarchical structures that exist within a particular society?

Thirdly, it was emphasized that a good understanding of cultural context is essential for anticipating risk to specific groups of young people. As we know, young people in different cultural, social, economic, gender, ethnic and religious categories experience great diversities in their social roles, and are subject to vastly different societal expectations. Therefore, young people in various cultures and categories may suffer very different consequences as a result of their involvement in humanitarian programming. Do participatory programmes take into account gender dimensions of risk, for example? Do we adequately consider how girls are affected when they reject traditional social roles and become leaders among their peers? Are we concerned that they be stigmatised or marginalized, and their marriage opportunities diminished as a result of participation? Conversely, are we overly concerned about young girls to the point that we neglect the risks faced by many boys? In northern Afghanistan, for example, boys are particularly targeted for sexual abuse, though in our efforts toward gender sensitivity, we often overlook boys' protection needs.

Fourthly, it was stressed that careful consideration is needed of the risks involved in encouraging young people to hold views and espouse values that are not sanctioned by adults in their communities. Caution should be taken while endorsing specific ideas (such as non-discrimination, secularism, gender equality) that are not widely shared by parents and adult community members, and that may increase the likelihood of intergenerational conflict. Peace-building initiatives, for example, often encourage young people to develop friendships across conflict boundaries. Though such activities may have some positive outcomes, what risks do young people face when they are expected to hold attitudes that may be condemned by adults?

#### *Whose agenda?*

Whose agenda does participatory programming reflect? Peace-building initiatives, for instance, are often driven by donors and NGOs rather than by young people themselves. As a result, they often reflect a largely Christian set of values such as love, forgiveness, democracy and equality, which may not represent the values of young people themselves. Should young people from warring communities be brought together simply because this is a priority for international organizations? What if young people themselves have no desire to engage in inter-community initiatives? Are we open to the different agendas of young people that true participation may bring to the surface? And how can organizations truly remain neutral, suspend their own agendas, and refrain from manipulating the outcomes of projects when they are dependent on outside funding for support?

The implication is, of course, that protection efforts such as peace-building are unlikely to be either effective or sustainable if they are developed solely as a response to adult, or outsider agendas. It was suggested that a very gradual approach is needed, and that young people must be involved in a real process of self-empowerment before they can be expected to participate meaningfully in dialogue with young people from rival

communities. Such an approach, however, requires adequate time and support from the wider community, and most importantly, a willingness and inspiration on the part of young people themselves.

#### *Whose timetable?*

While agency staff generally work on a nine to five schedule, young people often have responsibilities that do not correspond to this timetable. Given their domestic duties and obligations toward income-generation, young people cannot be expected to conform to the workday of foreign aid workers. In addition, travel during the day may put young people at risk of military abduction. But are we sensitive to such time constraints when developing participatory programming?

#### *Extra burdens*

Questions were raised regarding how much responsibility young people should have to bear during participatory programming. How do we ensure that young people's participation does not turn into exploitation or replace the efforts of adults, local organizations and the international community? How can we ensure that demands on young people's time do not interfere with their familial and communal responsibilities, and create a conflict of interests between young people and adults?

#### *Competition between NGOs and between young people*

Participants expressed concern about the competition that often develops between NGOs for young people's involvement in projects. It was noted that NGOs sometimes vie for youth membership with promises of food, money, education, t-shirts, and other desirable commodities. Conversely, it was also suggested that practitioners must take care not to create or intensify competition between young people for association with particular NGOs. To this end, project staff must be aware of interpersonal rivalries between young people, and how the activities of NGOs and humanitarian agencies may create or fuel existing hostilities. But how can young people be brought together as a collective, cohesive group amidst situations of scarce resources and deprivation?

#### *Transparency*

Several participants noted the importance of transparency during work with young people. In particular, this means defining at the outset project goals and objectives. It requires that organizations themselves to have a clear sense of what their boundaries are in terms of the issues they're willing to address and support. It also means being clear about how much power young people will have in decision making, programme development and implementation so that they do not develop false expectations of operational processes. How much power *are* we willing to share with young people?

Transparency is particularly important so as not to nurture unrealistic expectations of project outcomes in young people. Adolescents and youths, while highly capable, may still lack a sophisticated understanding of the broader political context in which they carry out activities. They may not fully appreciate the barriers to realization of their goals, and may experience profound disappointment and disillusionment when their expectations are not met.

#### *Adult roles*

Some discussion took place as to the role of adult intervention in the context of young people's participation. As numerous participants asked, what if what young people want contradicts adult opinions of what is best for them? What if we are uncomfortable about the choices they make? Can we judge the judgements of young people, or what informs

their opinions? Can we interrogate their assumptions? Does adult wisdom have any relevance in the context of participatory activities? How do we support adolescents and youths while recognizing their sometimes limited maturity and experience? Conference participants emphasized the fact that participation cannot simply be a celebration of young people's voices, regardless of what they are saying. Rather, there must be room for adults to challenge and contest the young so as not to be patronizing, dishonest and deceitful. But how do we create this space for adult-youth dialogue?

It was suggested that in all circumstances, there must be a process of ongoing dialogue, responsiveness, and exchange between adults and young people. This requires flexibility and adaptability on the part of NGO staff, who must shift roles – from teacher to peer to parent – as necessary, in response to young people's needs. Conceived in this way, participation is a process of adults offering guidance and direction in accordance with young people's changing needs and priorities.

#### *What does participation lead to?*

Of great concern is the possibility that involving young people in humanitarian action has the potential to create intense frustration for adolescents and youth. While they are often anxious to tackle social issues at a wider level, opportunities for participation rarely extend beyond youth clubs or similarly restrictive and/or artificial venues and settings. How can we encourage the involvement of young people in larger political processes and ensure that participation in decision-making takes place outside of participatory programmes, thus affording them real power? And what happens to young participants when they turn 18, and their opportunities for involvement in humanitarian programming are rescinded? Such questions urge organizations to adopt a long-term perspective and examine communities as a whole in order to create opportunities for young people's continued involvement within society. What are some strategies for linking adolescent/youth-led initiatives to local level institutions and processes of governance?

### 2.3.3 PRACTICAL ISSUES FOR HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES

Throughout the conference, participants discussed the myriad organizational challenges associated with participatory approaches to humanitarian action. In particular, much debate focused on the operational and organizational changes necessary within humanitarian agencies, NGOs and donor organizations to truly enable young people to participate in protection solutions.

There were several fundamental challenges posed to the humanitarian community in this respect. First, it was repeatedly emphasized that we must include adolescents and youths in discussions about protection at the highest organizational levels in order to have a significant impact on the lives of young people affected by war. To this end, the very basis of protection must be recognition by adults that they do not have all the answers, and that seeking young people's input and innovations is crucial to building a safer environment for adolescents and youth in conflict situations.

There was also a call for recognition within the international community that young people are intimately involved in war, including through leadership positions. Many, in fact, assume positions of power and authority that they are unlikely to relinquish willingly in the aftermath of war. These youth are likely to remain in positions of influence, eventually becoming leaders of their communities and nations, and unless we provide them with positive opportunities for leadership, they may seek power and authority over

subversive elements instead. It was suggested that humanitarian organizations have a particular role to play in providing opportunities for young people's leadership, and engaging them in constructive activities related to nation-building and post-conflict reconstruction. But what does it mean for organizations to genuinely encourage young people in leadership roles? Such are the overarching questions that should be borne in mind while considering the details of and specific approaches to young people's participation discussed below.

#### *Human resources*

Significant questions were raised about the quality and quantity of agency staff necessary for developing participatory programmes with young people in emergency situations. In general, it was acknowledged that participatory approaches to programming may require a whole new set of sophisticated skills, and that much capacity building and training is likely to be needed throughout all levels of humanitarian organizations. Some participants argued that participatory work with young people requires a total reformulation of the adult role in relation to young people. Such discussion raised many questions: How do we move from our traditional roles as experts, professionals and leaders to being facilitators? How do we negotiate the deep script within us as adults that tells us we know what is best for young people? What does it mean for our professional development when our current expertise is not needed any more? Can the facilitation of young people's participation be approached as a profession with the related skills valued within professional contexts? Are we prepared for professional development in this way? Do we have the humility and flexibility it takes to adapt the ways we work with young people? If so, what methodologies do we need to develop in order to work effectively with young people? And are NGOs staffed with *enough* people to do good participatory work?

#### *Financial resources and adequate time*

Participatory approaches to humanitarian programming require sustained commitments in terms of both time and funding. Of great concern, therefore, is how to reconcile these long-term processes and funding needs with short-term support from donors. As several participants pointed out, donors must be educated about and sensitised to the significance of adopting a participatory approach in humanitarian work with young people. They must appreciate that participation is a long-term investment and process requiring funding of sufficient quantity, duration and flexibility. Adequate time is needed, for example, to develop an understanding of cultural contexts and local complexities, not least so as to minimise risks for young people. To this end, awareness must be built that participation is not an event, or something that can be achieved through a one-time workshop, but is a long-term process that is unlikely to be realised cheaply.

It was suggested that donor education and sensitisation to participatory approaches may be achieved through greater communication between headquarters and field staff, and by widespread dissemination of field reports among all levels of an organisation. Initiating and maintaining links between headquarters and field offices also ensures that young people's opinions will reach top organizational levels, where they have the potential to influence policy-making and programme design.

#### *Monitoring and evaluation*

There is an urgent need for monitoring and evaluation systems that capture the outcomes and impacts of young people's participation. In part, monitoring and

evaluation systems are needed to convince donors for support. Often, donors believe that participation is done for its own sake, and not because it has any real or lasting impact on young people's lives. Thus, the onus is on agencies to demonstrate tangible results in terms of improved protection. But what sorts of indicators can we use to measure the success of participatory projects in both the short and long term? How do we use participatory data to justify programming and to ascertain the efficacy of projects? How can we convince donors that participatory programming is as much about processes as it is about outcomes? Should seeking the opinions of young people be a significant part of monitoring and evaluation methodology? Do we have the necessary tools at hand to develop participatory monitoring and evaluation systems?

#### *Implications for organizational culture*

Discussion also took place regarding the organizational implications of adopting participatory approaches with young people. Often, participation is seen as something that happens 'out there', and does not concern what goes on within individual agencies. But many participants argued that a positive organizational context is fundamental to the success of participatory projects. This raises important questions for humanitarian agencies: What are the institutional barriers to developing participatory work with young people? To what extent do organisations themselves integrate the ideology of participation into their organisational culture and structure? Are those staff that are expected to conduct participatory activities with young people also the ones with the least power themselves within organizations? How might this affect their ability to achieve true participation in the field?

Many participants argued that true participatory work can only arise from an organization that has addressed obstacles such as hierarchical, bureaucratic structures; contradictions between the office and the field; and resistance to power sharing with field staff and young people. They urged organizations to think carefully about staff selection, overall agency governance, and the particular role of senior management. Much discussion implied that participation is not simply a new programmatic strategy to be employed with young people in the field, but that it is a philosophy or value that should guide the way we relate to and act towards others.

#### 2.3.4 CHALLENGES FOR RESEARCHERS AND ACADEMICS

There was much debate about the challenges for researchers involved with young people affected by armed conflict and forced migration. Some participants suggested that our academic training often leads to an unconstructive polarization of disciplines and issues, and that efforts must be made to reduce dichotomies and build bridges between different approaches. It was generally agreed that research would benefit from the integration of theoretical paradigms and methods, and from improving multidisciplinary approaches to research. There was broad recognition that the existing literature on young people's protection is insufficient, and that there is an overall lack of adequate documentation, information sharing and dialogue. It was suggested that knowledge management is needed in order to enhance interdisciplinary cooperation and learning, and that we must be much more creative about ways to disseminate information more widely.

There was some discussion about what young people's empowerment means for our role as researchers. To what extent are we ready to devolve power in our own work? Are we willing to involve young people at all stages of the research, or share authorship with young people? Or do we fear that young people will design research proposals that deviate from our own agendas, that we will not be able to secure funding, that shared

work will fail the test of academic rigour, or that the findings will not be scientifically robust?

### 3. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Cumberland Lodge Conference *Voices out of Conflict: Young People Affected by Forced Migration and Political Crisis* represents only one small step in an ongoing process of dialogue and learning about the protection of adolescents and youths in situations of war and displacement. For millions of young people throughout the world, safety and well-being remains elusive, and thus formidable challenges still loom in front of the international community. But the wealth of insight and expertise shared at the conference, and the collaboration and exchange that took place across professional and institutional boundaries, disciplines, agencies, cultures and geographic regions should not be underestimated. It generated many challenging moments and hopefully, some positive outcomes. Particularly noteworthy were the relationships forged between people who work in similar fields, albeit in different roles, countries and contexts. Many participants committed themselves to continued dialogue and cooperation on issues of young people's protection. Furthermore, a need was expressed for a follow-up event in order to track the progress of individuals, communities and organizations, and to deliberate further about concrete, practical ways forward for the international community.

The following is a summary of the principle conclusions and/or recommendations to arise from the conference:

- Adolescents and youth are often extremely prone to hazard during conflict. At the same time, many demonstrate remarkable resilience and take action to protect themselves and others from danger.
- The international community has thus far failed young people badly, and we are in urgent need of a new paradigm for protection. We must therefore problematize traditional notions of protection, according to which it is something done *to* young people. Recognizing the inadequacy of this approach, we must ask ourselves how we can use the term differently.
- *Young people's participation* may be the most viable means through which to improve protection mechanisms. Given the roles, knowledge, skills and experience of adolescents and youth, we should engage them as active participants in the establishment of protection mechanisms on their behalf, with constructive roles in ensuring their own safety.
- As there is no monolithic thing called protection, participation too may take many forms. It commonly implies young people's active involvement in decisions and activities that affect their lives, and the process of exerting power and influence over their situations. This may be done through consultation with young people, or by involving them in various stages of humanitarian programming such as design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.
- Insofar as it is a holistic method through which to support and develop young people's capacities for self-protection, participation implies adopting a culturally-grounded and adolescent/youth-centred approach to protection.
- Examples of good practice exist regarding young people's involvement in humanitarian programming. Involving young people in such measures has led to more relevant, effective and sustainable protection mechanisms, and also to the development of capacities and contexts that lead to a more protective environment.

- There are, however, many logistical constraints, and ethical and practical issues that need careful consideration while developing young people's participation. Significant challenges to conceptualising, operationalizing and internalising young people's participation suggest that there is much room for development with regards to concrete, practical ways forward.
- Clear strategies must be developed for overcoming both cultural and logistic constraints to young people's participation in humanitarian programming.
- Serious ethical issues arising from participatory programming include enhanced risk or burden for young people, imposing unwelcome agendas or time demands, creating competition between the young, setting unrealistic expectations of social change, and establishing dishonest adult-youth relationships.
- Participatory programming often necessitates great operational and organizational changes within agencies themselves. It often requires increased human and financial resources, and long-term commitments from donors. It also has major implications for organizations in terms of their internal structure and culture.
- There are also substantial challenges for researchers and academics involved with war-affected adolescents and youth. Research would benefit from the integration of theoretical paradigms and methods, and from improving multidisciplinary approaches. Increased documentation, dissemination, information sharing and dialogue is needed in order to enhance interdisciplinary cooperation and learning.



# Appendices

## Appendix 1 – List of Speakers and Participants

### SPEAKERS & STEERING COMMITTEE

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